A longitudinal study of work-based, adult–youth mentoring☆

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Abstract

Using a longitudinal design, this study explored the relation of urban high school student attitudes toward school, work, and self-esteem beliefs to work-based mentoring, mentor satisfaction, and employment status. Participants included high school students taking part in a formal work-based mentoring program, students who established informal mentoring relationships at work, students who worked without a mentor, and students who were not employed during the academic year. While there were no significant group differences in the measures at the start of the year, results at the end of the year showed that students in the formal mentoring program believed more strongly that school was relevant to work than those who worked without a mentor. Students with mentors had higher levels of self-esteem than those who did not work. Students who were highly satisfied with their mentors had higher levels of self-esteem and believed more strongly that school was relevant to the workplace than students who did not work. The implications of these results are discussed and future research areas are identified.
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1. Introduction

School-to-work programs for high school students continue to expand in the US as both businesses and schools search for ways to develop a more highly skilled workforce. For scholars, this rapid expansion has led some to focus on theoretical frameworks explaining a student's transition to work (e.g., Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg, & Roarke, 1997; Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1999), while others have explored program effectiveness (e.g., Bassi & Ludwig, 2000; Linnehan, 2001). An implicit assumption of these school-to-work programs is that there are advantages to shepherding a high school student into the workforce using a structured format. Given this assumption, it is only natural that school-to-work programs that rely on adult–youth mentoring have grown considerably over the past two decades. This is particularly true for programs aimed at disadvantaged youth for whom continuing their education is often not feasible (Guetzloe, 1997). This programmatic growth, however, has not been matched with a comparable increase in empirical research, particularly research on formal programs that are based exclusively on the adult–youth mentoring relationship. Furthermore, while there has been an interest in examining different mentor–protégé types (i.e., formal vs. informal) in the organizational literature (e.g., Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992; Noe, 1988; Ragins & Cotton, 1999), this has not been the case in the youth-mentoring literature.

The present study addresses these latter two concerns through its longitudinal examination of student attitudes and beliefs across groups of high school students with different types of mentoring, work, and school experiences over the course of an academic year. In contrast to the organizational literature, no studies were found in the youth-mentoring literature that explored different mentoring types (e.g., formal vs. informal). Organizational scholars have focused on differences in the benefits provided by formal and informal mentors to their protégés and have defined an informal mentoring relationship as one that is developed between a mentor and protégé spontaneously, outside a structured program.

The findings of this past research, however, have been mixed. Some have reported no differences in the levels of psychosocial support given to protégés who are in formal or informal mentoring relationships (Chao et al., 1992). Others have found that informal relationships offered greater psychosocial support to their protégés than formal relationships (Fagenson-Eland, Marks, & Amendola, 1997; Ragins & Cotton, 1999). In an attempt to explain these divergent findings, it has been proposed that differences in satisfaction with the mentoring relationship may be a more powerful explanatory variable than mentoring type (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000).

Given its importance in the organizational research, coupled with the reliance of many school-to-work programs on adult–youth mentoring relationships, the lack of studies exploring issues of mentor type and satisfaction represents a significant gap in the youth-mentoring literature. Mentor type and satisfaction may be particularly important factors to explore for adult–youth mentoring programs administered at the high school level. The mentor–protégé relationships in these programs are forged at a critical time in the development of a young person's identity, a time characterized by an adolescent's struggle between industry and inferiority (Erikson, 1963, 1997).